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John Henry Boner

BY MARCUS BENJAMIN, PH. D.

Early last autumn, while spending a few days in Richmond, I visited the beautiful cemetery of Hollywood and there with uncovered head I paid silent homage to the dust of those brave heroes of the Lost Cause whose memory is preserved by that rude pyramid of stones which loving hearts and strong hands have combined to rear to the glory of the military achievements of the Confederate soldiers. Continuing on my way in that silent city of the dead, I saw the memorials of many who bore names famous in the history of the commonwealth and the nation, and then at the extreme end of the enclosure I found the place where President Davis was laid away. On the banks of the James, overlooking the city he loved so well, and surrounded by those who were dear to him in life rests the great leader of the Confederacy. Thus are the worthy sons of Virginia honored by their descendants.

A few weeks later I visited Raleigh, and there, while basking in the sunshine in the little square that surrounds the state-house, my mind wandered back to a bleak and dreary March day earlier in the year when the remains of John Henry Boner—North Carolina's first man of letters—were consigned to an unmarked grave in an obscure cemetery in Washington. Like Poe—unappreciated and neglected in life by his own—he awaits the resurrection into fame that will come as surely as it did to that greatest of all American writers. In the hope that it may come soon the following lines are written.

In the old historic town of Salem, North Carolina, Boner was born in 1845. A picture of the actual house in which he first saw the light of day is given in the volume of his poems published after his death, and in that building his first poem was written. Under the title of "Broken and Desolate" he describes "the old home where my youth was spent." In after years he found it "all sadly altered" and "all changed," so that he writes:

. . . . "I pressed my face
 Against the silent wall, then stole
 Away in agony of soul,
 Regretting I had seen the place."

Of his boyhood days the bare fact that he received an "academic education" is all that he told of that period of his existence, for now that he has gone from us comes the realization that he never said much about himself. Among his poems is "A Memory of Boyhood" in which he describes how:

"Floating on the gentle Yadkin in an olden-time canoe
 Singing old plantation ballads—I and charming blue-eyed Sue—
 Blue-eyed, golden tressed Sue."

Other stanzas tell of the "ripe delicious muscadines," "sweetest grapes that ever clustered," but grapes were not all he gathered, for he writes: "sweeter lips were never pressed," and closes with,

"Years may pass, but I can never cease to dream of blue-eyed Sue
 And the mornings on the Yadkin in the olden-time canoe—
 Blue-eyed, golden tressed Sue."

As he grew into manhood he learned the printer's trade and in time was graduated from the composing room into the editorial sanctum, being connected with journals both in Salem and in Asheville. During the reconstruction period he seems to have affiliated with the republican party, for which indiscretion he was to pay severely, but in extenuation of that course it may be said that he followed the example of many worthy North Carolinians, among whom was Robert M. Douglas, who for many years held important judicial appointments in North Carolina, culminating in his election in 1899 as justice of the Supreme Court of that State. Boner served as reading clerk of the North Carolina constitutional convention in 1868 and was chief clerk of the North Carolina house of representatives in 1869-70.

But there were also other interests, and he tells how on a still autumnal day,

"We walked among the whispering pines."

There it was his misfortune

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"To watch those fatal roses bloom
 Upon her cheeks—red, cruel signs—
 But all of love, not of the tomb,
 We spoke among the whispering pines."

It was while in Raleigh that he learned to love her

. . . . "Unto whom I cleave
 Loyally and do believe
 Noblest type of womanhood."

And perhaps it was there that he wrote:

"Ah what a perfect night is this
 For sauntering slowly hand in hand
 Under moon-silvered leaves to stand
 And touch lips brimming with a kiss,

 "While the warm night air, rich with scent
 Of white magnolia and red rose,
 Through the low limbs above you bent."

His political experience seems to have been his undoing at home, for he soon left his native State and entered the civil service in Washington, where until 1886 he served in the printing office, at first as a compositor and then as a proof-reader. That he was appreciated by his associates is shown by the fact that in 1878 he was president of Columbia Union, No. 101, in which office "he showed executive ability and a thorough knowledge of parliamentary practice, and he gave the union a conservative and safe administration."

It was during these years that fame as a poet came to gladden his life. His verses of this period were of his own Southland.

"So one who leaves his boyhood's home,
 About the wretched world to roam,
 Led off by visions born of hope
 Inspired by youth's kaleidoscope,
 Will often turn—his visions fled,
 His hopes like storm-bent blossoms dead—
 Toward that place of all the blest,
 Old home, the haven of sweet rest."

Soon after the return of the democratic party to power Mr. Boner, at the instigation of those who were not willing to forget his political affiliations in his native State, was discharged

from the government service on the ground of offensive partisanship.

Meanwhile in 1883 his first book of poems entitled "Whispering Pines" was published in Washington, and the beauty of many of his verses gained for him recognition and appreciation from the literary men of the North, chief among whom was Edmund Clarence Stedman, who has ever extended a friendly hand to younger and worthy authors, and with whom he had formed a pleasant acquaintance through correspondence. In his "Poets of America," published in 1885, Stedman specially mentions Boner in writing of Southern poets, and in describing their work he says, "that they open vistas of the life and spirit of the region." Of no one is this truer than of Boner.

Learning of his having been removed from office, Mr. Stedman invited Boner to New York City, and soon secured congenial employment for him as one of the staff on the Century Dictionary, then in course of preparation. For a time he aided Mr. Stedman in his great Library of American Literature, and of that service it is recorded "for the accuracy of the text we are greatly indebted to the friendship and professional skill of Mr. John H. Boner, of the Century Dictionary staff, who has given much of his spare time to the correcting of our page-proofs, and in other ways has been of service to the work."

With the change of scene came new inspirations and he wrote a series of City Sonnets, among which is his "Broadway at Noon." That great thoroughfare he calls the "Niagara of Streets," and he says:

. "Not the roar
Of ocean on her wildest crags could drown
The tumult of this torrent; and the prey
Of tempests, were they cast upon the shore
From places where the wild waves drew them down
Could show no stranger wrecks than this Broadway."

Also of this period is his "Our American God, Hustle," which opens with

"All things that follow nature's course take time"

and then

. "The crime
Of haste is man's, who, trampling on law, pleads
God's ignorance of what the future needs."

His best known poem is his "Poe's Cottage at Fordham," which appeared in the *Century Magazine* in November, 1889. I quote the last stanza:

"Here through this lowly portal,
Made sacred by his name,
Unheralded immortal
The mortal went and came.
And fate that then denied him,
And envy that decried him,
And malice that belied him,
Has cenotaphed his fame."

His standing as a man of letters received further recognition by his election in 1888 to membership in the Authors Club in New York. An honor well deserved and gladly conferred upon him.

It may be interesting to recall that about this time Poe's cottage was offered for sale and Boner enthusiastically discussed with the present writer the desirability of organizing a Poe association which should have as its principal object the purchase and preservation of that historic home, but after careful deliberation it was decided that the project was not feasible and the scheme was abandoned.

For a time he served as literary editor of the *New York World*, and of that experience I recall a single incident. Pope Leo was seriously ill and an obituary notice was needed at once. Boner was assigned to the task and it was well on in the morning before he finished it, but it was never used. Boner himself was sleeping in his grave a year or more before the final summons came to the venerable pontiff.

During the years 1892-94 he was connected with the editorial staff of the *Standard Dictionary*. His experience and excellent judgment made him a valuable addition to that force of literary men. His desk for a portion of the time was adjacent to my own and the friendship that ensued continued till his death. It was at this period that he built the home on Staten Island to which he gave the name of Cricket Lodge, and he described it as

. "But a lodge indeed—
Two end-gables, one end freed
Of a dormer-windowed deep
Roof-tree—such where pigeons preen—
And the shingles stained moss-green."

In this home, his own,

“On a green and breezy hill
Overlooking Arthur Kill
And the Orange Mountains blue
In their everchanging hue.”

he had hoped to pass

. “Life’s declining years
Happier than the past had been.”

As his work on the Standard Dictionary approached completion its publishers recognizing his editorial ability placed him in control of their well known publication *The Literary Digest* over whose columns he continued in charge until 1897. The improved character of that journal, due to his critical judgment and excellent taste, soon became apparent and has since been maintained. In addition to his regular duties he prepared a valuable series of brief summaries of American contemporary poetry that attracted much notice.

Conspicuous among Boner’s traits of character was that of dogged persistence. He would not yield—he could not—and so on a matter of no great importance he declined to agree with his publishers, and rather than yield, he resigned from his editorship.

Then came dark days and soon

“The wolf came sniffing at my door,
But the wolf had prowled on my track before,
And his sniff, sniff, sniff at my lodge door-sill
Only made me laugh at his devilish will.”

Desultory literary work is not very remunerative, and while his poems found ready acceptance with the *Century Magazine*, and he contributed certain articles to such high-class publications as “Appleton’s Annual Cyclopedic,” still it was not long before

“The time came when I laughed no more,
But glanced with fear at my frail lodge door,
For now I knew that the wolf at bay
Sooner or later would have his way.”

But his cup was not yet full. Cricket Lodge—his only home—had to be given up. Sickness followed and then with nothing but his pride left there came

"A crash, and my door flew open wide,
 My strength was not as the beast's at my side.
 That night on my hearthstone cold and bare
 He licked his paw and made his lair."

At last, broken in spirit and in health, he appealed to friends in Washington asking that a place be found for him. A decision of the Civil Service Commission to the effect that removal from government employ on the ground of "offensive partisanship" prior to entrance in the service was invalid, fortunately made it possible to restore him to his place as proof-reader in the Government Printing Office. His literary associates in New York—members of the Authors Club—were successful in enlisting the powerful aid of Senator Depew, and in the spring time of 1900 he was welcomed back to his desk by many of his old colleagues.

It soon became apparent that his strength was not even equal to the light work required of him and he began to fail in health. The winter proved a severe one for him, and it was evident that a complete rest was essential for the restoration of his health. A small pamphlet entitled "Some New Poems" selected from writings published chiefly in the *Century Magazine*, subsequent to his "Whispering Pines" and most kindly dedicated to the present writer ("whose loyal friendship has been a solace and a help to me in dark days"), furnished the slender purse required for a few months visit to North Carolina.

In May he wrote from the hospital where he had gone for recuperation: "Am going South next week, if possible. In bad shape. Doctor says consumption." A few days and he was able again to hear "the notes of the Southern mocking-bird."

"But you must live in the South,
 Where the clear moon kisses with large cool mouth
 The land she loves, in the secret of the night,
 To hear such music—the soul-delight,
 Of the moon-loved land."

For a little more than six months he was happy in being

"Back in the Old North State,
 Back to the place of his birth,
 Back through the pines' colonnaded gate
 To the dearest spot on earth."

No sweeter joy can a star feel
 When into the sky it thrills
 Than the rapture that wings a Tar Heel
 Come back to his native hills."

In the exuberance of his joy at being among his "loved ones in mothernook" he wrote "The Wanderer Back Home" of which the foregoing is the initial stanza. It was published in the Charlotte, N. C., *Observer*, of December 15, 1901, and only a few days before he sent the following message to his comrades in Washington: "I am in bed again and am mortally sick. Have a new doctor who tries to jolly me along." This message came from Raleigh, where much of his time was spent, and of which place he wrote facetiously years before: "I feel quite at home in New York. It reminds me so much of Raleigh." His visit was near at an end, and to his friends "he spoke of how he loved Raleigh and its people and hoped to spend his last days there," "but not thus the stern fates would."

In January he returned to Washington and tersely announced his arrival with "'And the cat came back!' I go to work tomorrow."

For a little while he was able to continue at his desk, but it soon became apparent that for him

"Night is falling—gently falling, and the silver stars are shining."

With pain that was severe and with suffering that was cruel he struggled against the inevitable through the year with a courage as noble as that shown by those immortal comrades who fought through the Wilderness with Lee. And then in March, 1902, the end came and he realized

"The bliss of that Eternal Rest
 Emancipated souls must know."

For he found

"Reunion with the loved and lost,
 Revelation of the Almighty cause,
 The Unknowable made plain—the cost
 Of knowledge fixed by wondrous laws."

Let me add one more stanza

"Howe'er it be, one thing I know:
 There is a faith which hath sufficed
 Men mourning in the land of woe—
 A simple faith in Jesus Christ.

Among his earlier poems—doubtlessly one written before he left North Carolina—I find the following words:

“Where shall my grave be—will a stone
Be raised to mark awhile the spot,
Or will rude strangers, caring not,
Bury a man to them unknown?”

His associates and friends bore him to a lonely grave—as yet unmarked—and there far from home and far from those he loved he rests. In one of his sweetest poems he tells how

“The bells are ringing—Sabbath bells.”

and then

. “I hear
The old Moravian bell ring clear,
But see no more—tears fill my eyes,”

and then the wish

“Where’er it be my fate to die,
Beneath those trees in whose dark shade
The first loved of my life are laid
I want to lie.”

* * * * *

And What of the Man? I have tried to tell, in his own words, as far as possible, the story of the life of my friend Boner, and my effort will not have been in vain if perchance my poor endeavor finds favor among the men and women of the Old North State he loved so loyally, and of whose beauties he sung so sweetly, and it may be—I pray that it may be so—that they may bring him home at last to rest in the little Moravian graveyard in Salem.

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